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ABSTRACT

Young children possess a unique way of knowing and learning that is best accommodated by developmentally appropriate practices that create a holistic, integrated, active learning environment. In the first part of a two-phase study, a survey of all elementary school principals in the largely rural state of Idaho revealed a somewhat tepid, moderate agreement with the use of developmentally appropriate practices in the primary grades, with principals from smaller rural districts showing even less support for certain components of best practice. In the second phase of the study, 55 principals from the smallest, more isolated rural schools were surveyed to investigate problematic components of developmentally appropriate practices. Principals believed that the factors influencing the implementation of a developmental approach to teaching young children were, in descending order, teacher beliefs, parent expectations, teacher dispositions, principal beliefs, teacher satisfaction, supervisor expectations, and school board and on-going training. On-site interviews with 16 principals revealed that virtually all of them desired a developmental approach to teaching in kindergarten, while 50 percent expressed the same desire for grade 2. Problems in implementing developmentally appropriate practices included lack of large blocks of time for in-depth work, community perceptions that some methods do not include enough skill development, and the need to support standardized testing. Two of the 16 schools visited exhibited an especially high level of teaching principles and strategies that matched definitions of developmentally appropriate practices. Contains 20 references. (TD)

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Principals' Ability to Implement "Best Practices" In Early Childhood

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A research forum session conducted at the National Rural Education Association annual meeting September 24-27 in Tucson, Arizona. Address correspondence to Dr. Judy French, College of Education, Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725.

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Principals' Ability to Implement Best Practices in Early Childhood

In recent years a number of public policy positions and statements have been issued (NAEYC, 1997; NAESP, 1990; NAEYC & NAECSSSDE, 1990, NEGP, 1995) focusing attention on the education of young children from birth through age eight. These documents share a recognition of the efficacy of quality early childhood programs to not only have a positive effect on young children's schooling, but to have an impact on their lives well into adulthood. Although schools and the general public have reaped the benefits from such programs as Head Start, they have only sporadically instituted congruent and continuous early childhood programming through the primary grades.

Research on Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Basic to the field of early childhood education is the recognition that young children through age eight possess a unique way of knowing and learning that must be responded to with teaching strategies different from those employed with older elementary children. Early childhood educators are committed to interactionist and constructivist theories which incorporate an active learning environment in which the child engages in learning with concrete materials and meaningful experiences. In contrast to a behaviorist approach, the approach of early childhood educators is holistic and integrated. Among the strategies indicated by an integrated approach to learning are a learning center approach, large time blocks for project work, self-initiated learning and discovery, and play. In this approach, the arts, children's friendships, and leaning appropriate classroom behavior are as much a part of the curriculum as are mathematics and learning to read. Further, standardized test are regarded as inadequate measures of children's learning.

There appear to be numerous benefits related to the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, including increased creativity (Hirsh-Pasek, 1991), less test anxiety and fewer stress behaviors (Bently & Wilson, 1989; Burts, et al., 1992; Burts, Hart, Charlesworth & Kirk, 1990), and higher competencies in language and social development (Whitebook, Howes, Phillips & Pemberton, 1989). In addition, young children in developmentally appropriate classrooms appear better able to take responsibility for their own learning than children in academically directed classrooms (Marcon, 1992).

Rural Schools' Problems and Opportunities

Administrators play a key role in assuring quality early childhood education. They serve as instructional leaders and facilitators for change (Dwyer, 1985). They are largely responsible for hiring qualified personnel for teaching positions. Through their professional memberships and interpretations of research, they have a direct effect on the quality of instruction that teachers are able to provide (Chance, 1991). Rutherford (1985) asserts that effective principals have clear, informed visions of what they want their schools to become and can translate those visions into goals and experiences.

Small, isolated school have unique leadership advantages and problems (Hill, 1993; Schmuck, R. & Schmuck, P., 1992; Williams, 1990). Some of the advantages include more latitude in shaping programs with fewer to convince, more fluent and informal communication networks both within schools and community, and less formal structure, making change smoother and quicker (Hill, 1993). However, some of the same advantages may lead to problems. Small community networking can lead to "gossip" and second-guessing leadership decisions with easier "community uprising" at change (Hill, 1993).

Other problems associated with rural school leadership include identical national and state expectancies regardless of school size, fewer monetary, materials and training resources, multiple roles and school sites resulting in separation and travel, little direct feedback from supervisors, high turnover of administrators, and isolation from peers (Spiropulos, 1996; Hill, 1993; McRobbie, 1990).

In a study of 80 small schools in 21 states, Schmuck and Schmuck (1992), concluded the biggest problems were social and emotional. Teachers and administrators in isolated, rural schools were overworked and frustrated. School structure was authoritarian with little joint planning, sharing of ideas or peer coaching. Although classroom sizes were small, there was little interactive instruction. Indeed, they found 80% of instruction to be unidirectional lecturing. The one grade level in which teaching was interactive was kindergarten.

Williams (1990) found teacher attitudes and tradition to be the biggest impediments of change. She suggests that success in moving a rural school toward more appropriate practices calls for a broad range of support that include retraining of teachers with courses, workshops, conferences and site

observations,the purchase of new materials, peer coaching, and support from district personnel and the community.

Purpose of the Study

This paper reviews the results of a two-part investigation of Idaho's elementary school principals' beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate early childhood practices in kindergarten through grade three.

In the first phase of the study (French, Peña, Lambert, & Jensen, 1995) all elementary school principals in the largely rural state of Idaho were surveyed to determine their level of agreement with developmentally appropriate practices related to assessment, teacher qualifications, and developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. Results of phase one indicated that principals generally expressed a somewhat tepid, moderate agreement with developmentally appropriate practices. In addition, results suggested that principals from smaller rural districts showed even less support for certain components of best practice.

In the second phase of the study, which is the primary focus of this report, the smallest, more isolated rural schools were surveyed to further investigate issues related to effective implementation of best practices in early childhood classrooms. The smaller schools included in the second study were limited to those school districts located 35 miles or more away from a college or university, with fewer than 2,500 students. The study was designed to investigate components of developmentally appropriate practices that pose problems, reasons why they are problematic, and resources needed to implement a developmental approach to teaching young children in pre-kindergarten classes through grade three.

Method

Sixty-nine percent (55) of the 76 principals in small isolated school districts responded to a survey that addressed problematic areas of developmentally appropriate practices. In addition, sixteen schools that represented all geographic regions of the state were selected for on-site visits. The interviews with principals further explored findings of the initial survey and focused on leadership style, teacher dispositions and beliefs, and community character. Classroom observations and talks with teachers completed the on-site investigation.

Results

Statistical analysis of the responses to the survey instrument showed that principals believe the greatest factors influencing the implementation of a developmental approach to teaching young children were teacher beliefs (89%), parent expectations (87%), teacher dispositions (82%), principal beliefs (79%), teacher satisfaction (78%), supervisor expectations (74%) and school board and on-going training (72%).

On site interviews with sixteen principals revealed that virtually all these principals expressed a high desire to see a developmental approach to teaching young children in kindergarten, while 50% expressed the same desire for children in grade two. Principals indicated that problematic areas related to developmentally appropriate practices included organization of the schedule to include large blocks of time for in-depth work, methods that may be perceived by the community to not include enough skill development, and the need to support standardized testing. The majority of principals reported their leadership style to be democratic with a site-based management philosophy that serves to inspire and support teachers in their work.

In two of the sixteen small rural schools visited, an especially high level of teaching principles and strategies closely matching definitions of developmentally appropriate practices were applied. These two schools and their principals had made changes with the help of grant money, and had utilized multiple resources, varied training structures for teachers, communication with parents and other district personnel, and had implemented a democratic open leadership style. Model programs such as these, adhering to developmentally appropriate practices, can be implemented in rural schools. Research does support both academic and social-emotional benefits over time. The philosophy about how young children learn and resultant best teaching practices are based in sound, core early childhood principles, most of which do not take additional funds to implement. These two school stand out, not only to the seasoned educator, but to the community populace. Students and adults deserve more of this type of learning environment.

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